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# SEA LETTER

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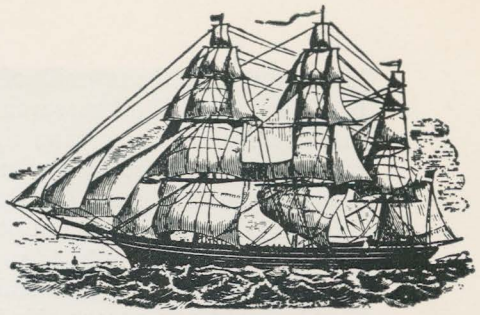

*Loading at Port Blakely, winter, 1905. The vessels are possibly ENGLEHORN, four-mast bark of Liverpool; an unidentified port-painted four-mast bark; the four-mast Liverpool bark WANDERER; the four-mast schooner LYMAN D. FOSTER and the five-mast schooner CRECENT, both of San Francisco. The bark in the stream is possibly Norwegian.*

## WILHELM HESTER - Frontier Marine Photographer

BY ROBERT A. WEINSTEIN

One of the San Francisco Maritime Museum's most cherished holdings is the Hester Collection of approximately 1,350 glass negatives of maritime subjects made in the Puget Sound area around the turn of the century. The photographer, Wilhelm Hester, Hamburg-born, made his living on the waterfront in Tacoma and Seattle between 1893 and 1915. Under difficult conditions, using heavy and awkward equipment, he produced an unparalleled photographic record of the men and sailing ships of the day. Although documentary in character, the photographs reveal an extraordinary sensitivity to the beauty of ships and the sea. The collection is historically invaluable, artistically significant and unique in certain specific areas.

A large part of Hester's work concerned the huge volume of Pacific Northwest lumber cut, milled and

loaded for sea at the sawmills of Port Blakely, across the bay from Seattle. Working seven days a week and around the clock, the whining saws ripped out millions upon millions of board feet of lumber for the busy, building world beyond the seas. Loaded by night and by day, through bow ports and stern ports, from bobbing catamarans built by the mills to support the heavy loading chutes, vessels of every kind and rig from all parts of the world created here a scene of indescribable activity. Here vessels were loaded over their bows and sterns with towering deckloads as many as twelve feet higher than their main decks. Now they were loaded with milled laths and sometimes with unpeeled logs for use as pit props in the mines of Port Pirie, Australia, or South Africa. Vessels were moored abreast of the loading docks as close as safety allowed—to be quickly loaded, and then to set off to sea once more. Winter and summer alike they loaded lumber at the mills of Port Blakely.

Tugging at their moorings under leaden skies, or gently alive with softly slipping shadows under the summer sun, their beauty was recognized and recorded by Wilhelm Hester. Vessels of all nations came to Port Blakely. The young and the old, the famous and the little-known ships; every type of deep-sea rig afloat loaded lumber the year round. All of this Mr. Hester captured on plate after plate in his 8" x 10" view camera. The vigor and excitement of this noisy, whirling operation must have been a strong dose for an artist. We can only admire the grace of this careful artist-businessman who let himself be caught up so completely in the wonder and magic of this experience.

The most significantly unique area of Hester's work is the large number of glass-plate negatives made in the Masters' saloons or cabins. Commonplace as the subject was, there are no known collections anywhere in the world that include more than a few poorly lit, badly photographed views of it made by amateurs. In the Hester Collection we are now privileged to see, in rich detail, example after example of the cabins of well-known and lesser-known vessels—from the austere saloon of a poorly outfitted Chilean bark used by the Master and a select group of his card-playing drinking companions to the richly carpeted and ornately decorated home afloat of the Master and Mrs. of the famous London "flyer," the four-mast bark LYNTON. Here are superbly revealed details of construction as well as a record of the pre-

*The master and his card-playing cronies gather in the saloon of a Chilean bark.*

*Captain and Mrs. E. G. James at home in the richly decorated afterquarters of the London four-mast bark LYNTON.*

vailing taste in decoration and fashion completely denied us in maritime photographs until now. Photographed either by natural light from an overhead skylight on deck or with the help of the flash-gun of the time, the photographs are models of clarity.

Important as well are the many portraits of Masters and Mates of identified vessels. They provide a long-awaited opportunity to expand our knowledge about these men and their work. Finally, of great interest are the many plates of paintings of ships. Representative of this type of marine art gathered from painters in all the ports of the world, the paintings are a remarkable cross-section of the various styles of practitioners of this art. Photographs of these paintings allow us, also, to see certain important details of vessels where no other known pictorial source exists.

As for Hester himself, we know little about his early life as yet. Born in Hamburg, he arrived on the Pacific Northwest Coast in the early 1890s. His account books show him to be in the photographic business as early as 1893. We can only guess where he learned the skills of the photographer. What is quite clear is that he learned them very well. He was blessed with uncommon energy, a strong responsiveness to the beauty of the sea and its ships and an uncompromising integrity in his work.

For 30-odd years after the Civil War, European emigration to the United States was enormous. The Pacific Northwest, busy building, booming with burgeoning industries, was host to its share of the hopeful new arrivals. Lumbering was the dominant industry; the shipping of lumber by sea ran a close second. The work was hard, and the life was rough and frugal. More than one young foreign seaman jumped his ship, or paid off of her to come ashore and work. To the hard-worked windjammer sailor of the day, here in Puget Sound was an opportunity for a better life. The secrets of who was who, where one hailed from or how old a man might be were not often asked and seldom recorded. This can account for the lack of information on Wilhelm Hester, who may have found his way to Seattle under such circumstances.

The Puget Sound area was virtually a frontier, and all business activity was struggling to find its footing. Photography in a frontier lumber town in the 1890s was a far cry from the well-organized operation we see about us

today. It was a hazardous profession, as everything was in short and uncertain supply—customers as well as materials. The portrait photographer needed social and business contacts not too readily achieved by a newcomer without capital. It took most of a photographer's time, working singlehanded, just to "sell" his customers and then make the necessary plate exposures. The subsequent plate developing and printing most often required that he maintain a supplier relationship with independent technicians. The ever-present geographical and travel difficulties could thus make a profitable operation almost impossible. The choice of a "specialty" to support the frontier photographer was always a critical one. Perhaps our Mr. Hester just fell into his choice . . . we do not know. But it seems more likely that it was a definite choice, for his love of the sea and sailing ships marked his whole working life. The hundreds of seamen and the ships that touched the Puget Sound area became his successful specialty.

The seamen of the sail still enjoyed, at the turn of the century, an attachment and a deep sense of affection for their beautiful tall ships. Masters and mates felt the pride of command and the importance of the faithful discharge of their responsibility keenly. Photographs of their ship, her crew and officers were the most acceptable and popular symbols of their feelings. Nothing else so well sustained the romantic excitement conjured up by these "white-winged beauties of the rolling sea." The making of such photographs became Hester's work, his livelihood as well as his legacy.

Many of the world's great seaports at this time supported other such photographers. Wilton of San Francisco, Stebbins of Boston, Gould of London and Sam Hood of Sydney are a few of the other memorable examples. Certain Masters photographed successfully on the deep sea—Captain H. H. Morrison of Port Townsend, Captain George Plummer of Puget Sound, Captain Walter Mallet of the GUY C. GOSS and Captain Richard Woodgett of the immortal CUTTY SARK. Our photographic record of the great ships of the 19th century depends in part upon the efforts of these men.

How did our Mr. Hester pursue his calling? Let us follow him as he worked his way through a normal day's activity. His working grounds were the docks and wharves of Seattle and Tacoma, the waters of Elliott Bay and Commencement Bay. But perhaps most important was the bay at Port Blakely, directly across from Seattle. Located in that area were the great seven-day-a-week sawmills as well as the Hall Brothers shipyard close by. There were built the graceful wooden sailing lumber carriers from the lumber freshly sawn at the Blakely mills.

Armed with the published lists of newly arrived vessels, and anticipating the possibility of meeting old friends again, Hester boarded as many of these ships and schooners as he could each day to take orders for photographs. We can almost see him carrying an 8" x 10" view camera firmly fastened to a heavy, ruggedly built tripod, a leather case holding glass plates, wooden plate holders, flash powder and the contemporary version of the "flash-gun" also a part of his equipment. Carrying his wide-angle lenses in a separate wooden box, order pad in his pocket, a morning newspaper for the Master in his hand, he arrived on the main deck ready for business. Arrangements were made for shooting the required sittings immediately. If the weather allowed, the views on deck would be taken first. Forbidding weather afforded the opportunity to take the lovely views photographed below in the Master's cabin or saloon. Once below, the formal shooting finished, negotiations might be carried on to photograph the framed painting of the Master's last command or of his present vessel that was hung on the saloon bulkhead and much prized by its owner. Such a photograph would be a splendid "earnest" for expected orders.

On deck again, in quick order the Master was photographed alone on his own quarter deck. Next a photograph was taken of the Master with his Chief Mate, and likely as not another one of the Master together with all of his officers. The Master might then be joined with his apprentices, if the ship carried them, for a final group photograph. Out of their grubby work clothes, decked out in their stiff collars, brass-bound jackets, company hats proudly emblazoned with company badges, spruced up and shining, the apprentices posed with charming mock seriousness.

Following this, the "Mrs. Master," were she aboard, joined the Captain for a portrait near the companionway or skylight. Finally, the children carried aboard and the family pet were grouped together to complete the portrait of the afterguard family. Now the crew assembled on the main deck or atop the midship house of the big four-mast barks. Joined or not by the officers, mustering up their sternest dignity, a picture of them was soon added to the mounting pile of exposed glass-negative holders. Sometimes a visiting "padre" aboard, such as the well-known Chaplain Stubbs of Tacoma, was invited to slip into the photographs of the crew.

The ship's personnel completed, at last the ship itself was photographed. Using his wide-angle lenses with telling skill, Mr. Hester moved as far aft toward the stern as he could and photographed the vessel looking forward. Perhaps recalling his own early days at sea, he encouraged the men and officers to step into these pictures in natural poses. Moving well forward on deck again, he would turn and photograph the vessel looking aft. If work were going on aboard the vessel, he often took an extra shot or two for his own pleasure. Lastly, the classic outboard full view of the vessel must be secured. This could be taken from alongside on the wharf or from a neighboring wharf. A nearby bridge, as in Tacoma, was often the ideal spot. If the vessel were moored in the stream, the deck of a hired launch or other cooperative vessel afloat helped solve the problem. Needless to say, a securely fastened and braced tripod was here of top priority.

With the taking of pictures at an end, the taking of orders began. As Mr. Hester's notes testify, the taking of orders was apparently an impromptu affair. On a variety of slips of paper, envelopes and used business cards,

*The master of the four-mast bark ECUADOR of London poses in carpet slippers and fedora with his mates, steward and pet dog.*

*Captain Techner stands by the wheel in oilskins probably made by himself or the ship's sailmaker. Many masters were proficient in the sailmaker's craft.*

the orders, the addresses to which the photographs were to be sent as well as arrangements for payment were jotted down. Sometimes the sailors wrote orders in their own hand, and this was an unavoidable but frequently risky affair. Sailors in port rarely had any cash, and they purchased against wages owed them by the ship, due at voyage's end. The Master was not always able to honor his sailors' committments for a variety of reasons. Numerous letters in Hester's files testify to the awkward nature of these arrangements. The sailors also quite casually expected him to serve as their private postal service, and he of course obliged. The orders were often for contact prints from the 8" x 10" plates. These were to be mounted on heavy cardboard. There were also orders for composites, made up of individual portraits of the men mounted with a photograph of the ship. Portraits were mounted as buttons or enlarged, mounted and framed. Orders completed, arrangements were made for delivery. If the vessel were to remain in port a while, delivery was made to the ship and payment expected upon delivery. If not, the work was mailed by Hester, payment taken in advance against the men's wages before leaving the ship. Mr. Hester had his share of losses in such a risky arrangement. In 1895 the ship BEN DEARG purchased a total of $84 worth of photographs and paid in full; in the same year the bark BERTHA ran up a bill of $11.25, which was finally paid off in lumber to be resold by Mr. Hester.

Moving in this fashion from wharf to wharf, out into the stream and back to the farther dock completed Hester's work day of selling and shooting. The arrangements he made for the processing of his work depended upon his location at day's end. As processing could only be done by professionals in Seattle and Tacoma, he made use of the Puget Sound steamers in transit between these towns. The well-known steamer FLYER was his favorite choice. Back and forth, morning and evening, a steady procession of Hester's work moved over Puget Sound. He sent his negatives to the developing lab with written instructions for each one, carefully noting each exposure and indicating the results he expected. The developed negatives were quickly returned to him for examination and printing instructions. Scrupulous craftsman that he was, it is rare to see a negative jacket on which he had not written precise instructions for the particular exposure and manipulations he wanted in the finished prints,

*Looking forward from the stern, Hester photographed the master and officers of the four-mast bark BERMUDA.*

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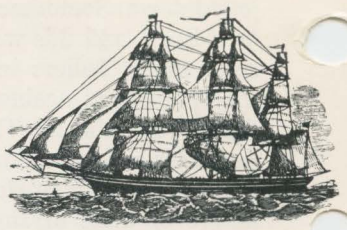

ANITA VENTURA, *Editor*

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as well as for sizes and the quantity of prints needed. On receipt of the finished work he himself returned to the ship to complete the promised deliveries. Our Mr. Hester was blessed to be as energetic as he obviously needed to be in this sort of operation.

Although his was an all-seasons job, it appeared to have its slack moments. His incomplete business records show entries for photographing local picnics, baseball teams, commercial buildings, businessmen, Indians and other groups of people ashore. In addition, he records sales of wood, coal, old clothes and furniture. In time, the sailors and steamers of the Sound became his customers, too. Thus, happily, exquisitely detailed photographs of these handsome vessels are still with us.

We can only be grateful that this young Hamburg German was so moved by the ever-changing beauty of the sail-borne vessels of his day and locale to have photographed so much of it, and through his skill as an artist to have done it so magnificently. Although Wilhelm Hester may not have meant to be remembered as he worked, his place in history is certainly secure. This photographic artist has produced a great body of work lacking in self-consciousness, deeply straightforward and honest in its vision, and therefore arrestingly true for us. As other great photographers have in their work created enduring monuments of their milieu, so Wilhelm Hester has raised an eloquent memorial to a time and people that produced "such ships and men as Earth shall not see again."

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*Robert A. Weinstein is a Research Associate in Western History for the Los Angeles County Museum and Special Consultant on Photographic Archives and History to the Special Collections Department of the Library of the University of California at Los Angeles. His most recently published article was "History Preserved on Film," which appeared in Vol. 1, No. 3-4 of the Los Angeles County Museum Quarterly. For this article on Wilhelm Hester and his work he has expressed gratitude to Karl Kortum, Director of the San Francisco Maritime Museum, Harold Huycke of Seattle, Andrew Nesdall of Massachusetts and Roger Olmsted of San Francisco for information generously shared with him.*

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## A Note on the Acquisition of the Hester Collection

After Wilhelm Hester's death in 1929, his home on Queen Anne's Hill in Seattle was sold. In 1947 the house and all it contained was resold to Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Sands, who discovered this portion of Hester's negatives and some prints in one of the rooms. Recognizing their historic value, the Sands tried in vain to interest buyers for a number of years. The collection was brought to my attention by a friend, Mr. Gordon Jones of Seattle. I corresponded with Mr. and Mrs. Sands, and with their help received a specimen group of glass plates. These were printed and shown to Mr. Emerson Spear of Los Angeles, the grandson of Captain Alexander Spear, who came around the Horn to San Francisco in Gold Rush days. Mr. Spear's appreciation of the collection and recognition of its historic value was both certain and swift. He was interested in purchasing the collection as a gift for the San Francisco Maritime Museum. Mr. Kortum and the Museum's Board of Trustees were pleased to accept the proposed gift. I then went to Seattle to examine the collection in full for Mr. Spear and, acting as his agent, purchased it. Through the assistance of Mr. Daniel Bryant of Bekins Van Inc., the collection was carefully packed and shipped to the Museum. Since then it has been partially identified and catalogued, safely stored, and a good number of the plates printed. It is proving to be an enormous mine of information and assistance to researchers of Pacific Coast maritime history.

— R.A.W.

*Robert A. Weinstein inspects one of Hester's glass negatives.*